Placemakers

A Guide to Developing Housing for Homeless People

Presentations and Materials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Regional Conferences on Housing for Homeless People

February through April 2000

Atlanta | Chicago | Dallas | Philadelphia | San Francisco

Placemakers:

A Guide to Developing Housing for Homeless People

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Editor's *Preface*

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs convened five ***Regional Conferences on Housing for Homeless People*** between February 17 and April 12, 2000. These two-day conferences, held throughout the country, brought together nonprofit service providers, housing developers, local government, foundation staff and real estate professionals to promote the creation of housing for homeless people. HUD's objectives for the conferences were to:

- Encourage action
- Connect partners
- Learn techniques
- Share experiences
- Celebrate successes

The conferences were organized along several key themes — funding, collaboration, housing development, management, and operations. In Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Philadelphia and San Francisco, between 80 and 200 attendees met in plenary assemblies, small workshops and action planning sessions to address these issues. They shared information and strategies on how to best conceptualize, plan, design, fund, develop, operate and manage housing for homeless and formerly homeless people. With workshop titles such as "Speaking the Same Language," "Educating Potential Partners" and "Connecting Development and Operations," presentations focused on increasing efficiency and improving communication. Practitioners in the field shared both their experiences and their visions for the future. Novices learned from old hands, new partnerships were built, and existing collaborations were strengthened.

In assembling this book, we primarily selected presentations, stories and tools specific to the development aspect of housing for homeless people. The book does not attempt to document exactly what occurred at each of the conferences nor to reproduce all of the information presented there. Rather, the materials were selected to give an overview of the critical steps in homeless housing development and to provide tools, methods and inspiration.

The majority of articles in this guide were adapted from presentations and materials presented at one or more of the five conferences. Additional materials were developed or adapted to support and complement the materials gathered. Each contribution includes a person or organization to contact for more information, and a complete list of conference presenters can be found in the resources chapter. We hope this book will be useful to organizations delving into the challenging, yet rewarding work of creating housing for homeless people. ■

Placemaking: A More Comprehensive Approach to Developing Housing

By Fred Karnas, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Needs, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

For more than two decades, we have debated the role of housing in the problem of homelessness. Some people have argued vociferously that access to safe, stable, affordable housing is the single solution to homelessness — after all, they say with a "home" you certainly would not be homeless. While no one argues that housing is not at least an important component of the solution to homelessness, others do argue that homelessness is also often caused by a myriad of other problems, such as substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and lack of job skills, all of which compromise the economic viability of the individual or family, making it impossible for them to access needed services and/or housing. They would argue that, until these issues are addressed, housing alone will have little impact on their lives. They argue that access to an array of services is critical to stabilizing homeless persons and making them "housing ready."

We must create a range of options which meet the needs of the full range of poor and homeless people.

The premise of HUD's housing conferences, which led to the publication of this guide, is that neither position is entirely accurate — homelessness is clearly too complex for a simple universal solution. We believe that rather than simply focusing on housing or services, we must focus on reconnecting homeless men, women and children with a sense of both symbolic and physical place — a place in society and a place to live, work and play.

Psychologist Leann Rivlin tells us in *The Meaning of Place* that place for each us is tied to such things as the natural environment, specific buildings, and the details of our houses, *and* our connections to friends, community, nurturing relationships and rituals.

Padraig O'Malley, in the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, suggests,

> *To be homeless literally means that you have no home to live in, that you are without the reference point to which you instinctively turn to define who you are in relation to the larger order of things; that you are deprived of your sense of place and privacy, your sense of belonging, or rootedness and community, of being part of a social configuration that gives context to your aspirations and purpose to living — all essential elements of identity, of self-worth, all inextricably related to the functioning of the psyche and the meaning of life. To lose your home is to lose part of yourself, of the meaning in your life; it induces a profound sense of loss and the grieving that inescapably accompanies loss.*

If we are going to end homelessness, we must address the array of needs which result in the disconnection of homeless persons from "place." We must become placemakers.

Clearly, a key element of "placemaking" is creating "physical" place. I would argue that nothing else really works unless a physical place is created. Safe, decent affordable housing is at the center of providing the stable environment needed to do so many other things, whether it be seeking employment, recovering from an addiction, or raising a healthy family.

We must create a range of options which meet the needs of the full range of poor and homeless people — Single Room Occupancy facilities, supportive housing, apartments, shared housing, and on and on. Whatever housing we provide should be just that, not some complex array of services that tenants have to participate in to retain a roof over their heads. We should be working hard to develop housing that is really housing — with the same rules we

must all abide by, but let's make sure that those who need services can get them.

We must protect the existing stock of low-income housing in communities, intervene to prevent evictions or create a move-out plan, provide mechanisms for rent and utility deposits, and consider the impact of building and zoning regulations on the development of affordable housing. We must ensure safe and decent housing, but too often building and zoning regulations also serve to inhibit or prevent the development of housing for unpopular populations.

Placemaking suggests we need a more comprehensive approach to developing housing than simply bricks and mortar, and rental assistance.

If we are to expand choices and truly build inclusive communities, we must also address housing segregation and discrimination. At its root, homelessness is a poverty problem, and that poverty is fed by the continuing problems of racism and classism that are more subtle, but just as real as they were a generation ago.

The second principle of placemaking is "inclusiveness." The voices of those who live in the housing we develop and those who participate in the programs we operate must be heard at every level of decision-making. I believe no organization that purports to serve homeless people should operate without significant formal input from the people they serve. It is the voices of our tenants that help us understand their struggles and inform our efforts to create better places.

The third principle of placemaking is "support." Services need to be available and accessible for poor and homeless people just as they are for those who have resources.

It is clear that it is difficult to escape poverty and homelessness without job training and job placement, day care, and health care. Some will need access to mental health services and others will need detox and treatment beds. And when people have completed treatment, they need access to sober housing in safe and nurturing communities.

We also need to think about how we respond to those who are struggling with chronic problems. For example, there is little utility in a simple policy of expulsion due to drug or alcohol use if our goal is to end homelessness. Experts on treatment for chemical dependency seem to agree that there are many different treatment models, but none of them work all of the time. Housing and treatment systems must be designed to offer a range of options and to take into account the reality of relapse. While federal programs cannot tolerate relapse that results in illicit substance use on-site, every federally funded program should have a plan to deal with relapse which avoids returning people to the streets. Our programs must also recognize the importance of the macro issues in treatment — the importance of reconnecting with community through jobs and housing.

Placemaking suggests we need a more comprehensive approach to developing housing than simply bricks and mortar, and rental assistance. Placemaking is about providing a safe, stable living environment and ensuring access to the supports needed to build or rebuild individual skills and reconnect to the larger community.

A little more than a decade ago, I led a nonprofit in the development of an SRO for 31 homeless women. Casa Teresa, as it was called, was not all that different from the thousands of SRO and Shelter Plus Care units that have been developed across the country in the past decade. The resources, as in so many other projects around the nation, came from a multitude of sources, including HUD, the City of Phoenix, local developers, the Junior League, local banks, and volunteers.

On opening day, 31 women, whose lives for many years had consisted of living on the street or in night shelters, were provided a room and furniture of their own.

But, as is often the case, the transition from the disconnection of life on the street to permanent housing was neither simple nor smooth. After all, for years the only real rules these women had to live by were that you had to be quiet and had to leave by 7 a.m.

There were many questions about, and tests of, the house rules. There was no real sense of what it meant to be responsible for your own space. There was very minimal use of community space, and there was a real sense for the first six months that what we had created was 31 separate shelters. We actually thought at one point we might have to evict everybody and start again.

But then it happened — I am not sure why or how. Maybe it was the unswerving support of the project staff; maybe it was the result of the passage of time that underscored that these really were permanent units that they did not have to leave early in the morning every day, or maybe it was the simple rekindling of memories of home. But whatever it was, things changed.

I believe it was the transforming power of place — the sense of safety and nurturing, the ability to create and sustain ritual, and the feeling of community and belonging.

One by one, each of the residents began to take personal responsibility, not just for their rooms, but for their lives. They felt safe to risk the hard work of recovery, mental health counseling, or interviewing for a job. They felt secure that whatever happened they had a place to come back to for rest and renewal.

And, one by one, as if in the blossoming of a flower garden, Casa Teresa became a community as the women joined together in small groups to fix a common meal, volunteered to help clean the common spaces or serve as facility receptionist, or sat together in the common rooms sharing their struggles and dreams.

Today, more than a decade later, Casa Teresa stands as a monument to the spirit of those first 31 women who discovered, after a long and arduous journey, that they had returned HOME. We, with their help, had created place where once the disconnectedness of homelessness had only offered despair.

We hope that this *Guide for Developing Housing for Homeless People* will give you the tools to become not just housers or service providers, but placemakers. If you do, I know we can transform our communities and end homelessness. ■